

Preface

Once upon a time there was no such thing as a decadent fairy tale. People throughout the land read fairy stories to their children at bed-time, but no one thought to question the presence of queer monsters, poisonous flora, and violent and subversive animals, even less the fetishisation of hair and feet, the uncontrollable cravings of mothers and step-mothers, and the disproportionate number of half-humans and secret hothouse chambers. No one thought to question the excess of sugar in the forest house of Hansel and Gretel, the ruinous eloquence of wolves, or the large number of bleeding women.

Then, came to this land in the late 1970s a wise and clever woman who spoke of the cruel eroticism of the stories fed to small children. She wove extraordinary magic with her words, transforming kings into sadistic gourmands, fairy castles into torture chambers, and capes and breeches into the robes of seduction. Above all, she pointed out that the moral of the tales served no one because the female body in these stories resembled a slab of meat on a banqueting table.

At first, people shunned the decadence of her fairy stories. ‘There are no fairies!’, they cried. But a few sages came forward and argued that the stories were actually Gothic. Sellers of books began to take notice and after two decades scholars in seats of high learning woke from their slumber. Two families of critics, one Feminist the other Comparatist, came together and revealed to each other the decadent power of the woman’s writing, and after that her work was read widely by adults of all ages. People savoured her stories, but they did not share them with their children. They realised that their moral lessons were closer to an awful truth than anything they had read before.

By the time the century’s clock heralded a new digital dawn, many people had developed a taste for Gothic decadence and were buying the woman’s books and reading her work online. Young readers feasted on its weirdness. This weirdness was later named ‘core literature’ and ‘PostModern Rupture’. No one saw Cinderella in the same way again. The decadent fairy tale was finally established and it was loudly proclaimed an object of dark beauty. People up and down the land were transfixed. Over the sea, King DreamWorks™ was delighted.

One day in the year 2023, in an ivory and gold tower in the south east of that great city, London, a group of early career researchers (and a few gnarled and degenerate elders) united to celebrate with readings and wine the decadent fairy tale, which by now was much more than a children’s bed-time story. And in their speeches they paid homage to that wise woman who showed that the stories people once read to their sleepy sons and daughters were bizarre decadent tales of monstrous cruelty and obsession.

*Ad honorem Angelae Carter (1940-1992), quae fabulas cruentas, voluptuosas, et veras reddidit.*¹

Jane Desmarais
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¹ *In homage to Angela Carter (1940-1992), who made fairy tales bloody, voluptuous, and true.*